

ST. PETERSBURG TIMES
11 April 1978

Professor who fought the CIA and won tells how it's done

STAT

By HELEN HUNTLEY
St. Petersburg Times Staff Writer

You can fight the Central Intelligence Agency and win. Ask Dr. Corliss Lamont — he did it.

The longtime civil libertarian and retired university professor brought the story of his battle to St. Petersburg Monday at a meeting of the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union.

For the past 25 years, the CIA had been opening all of Lamont's letters to and from the Soviet Union, copying them, resealing them and sending them on to their destination. Lamont says he never knew it was going on until he asked for the agency to give him his file under the Freedom of Information Act. The file contained photostats of 155 personal letters.

"I decided to sue the CIA for \$150,000 damages," he said. "They really hurt my feelings."

Most of the letters were to or from one of Lamont's former colleagues at Columbia University — a Russian economics professor named Vladimir Kazakevich — and contained scholarly discussions of economics and politics, Lamont said. Others were more personal, including two love letters Lamont wrote home to his wife while traveling abroad.

"I just hope the CIA learned something reading all that," Lamont said.

Two months ago, he won his case. A federal district judge in Brooklyn ordered the CIA to pay him \$2,000 damages and send him a letter of apology. Lamont said he got the letter last week.

The battle with the CIA was far from Lamont's first civil liberties victory. That came 45 years ago, when he was arrested for picketing in Jersey City. He helped win the right of workers in Jersey City to organize and the case against him was dropped.

Over the years, Lamont also has won battles with the House Un-American Activities Committee and with Sen. Joseph McCarthy's Subcommittee on Government Operations. He was cited for contempt of Congress, but when he fought the indictment, the case was dismissed.

He also has battled the State Department's passport office and the U.S. Postmaster General. It took him seven years to renew his passport because he refused to sign a form swearing he had never been a member of the Communist Party. He hadn't been a Communist, but he decided

that wasn't any of the passport office's business, he said. In 1958, the U.S. Supreme Court agreed with him.

"We couldn't travel in Europe, but I made up for it by going to Mexico twice," he said.

A few years later, he found out the U.S. Post Office was opening all second- and third-class mail from foreign countries to screen it for Communist political propaganda. If the postmaster general decided the material was subversive, the addressee would get a postcard asking him if he really wanted to receive it. Those who said they wanted their mail ended up on a list in the office of the House Un-American Activities Committee.

The postmaster general's downfall came when he sent one of those postcards to Lamont asking him if he wanted to receive a copy of the *Peking Review* someone had mailed him. Instead of sending back the card, Lamont sued the postmaster general. He won, in a unanimous Supreme Court decision in 1965.

Over the years, the FBI put together a 2,000-page file on Lamont, he said.

"My attorneys have told me that the FBI and the CIA spent a million dollars trying to prove I was a subversive," he said.

Lamont is the founder and chairman of the 26-year-old National Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, a 4,000-member group which makes a business of going to court in behalf of civil liberties.

"It's like the American Civil Liberties Union but it's not competitive," he said. "There's enough work for both of us."

He lives in New York.